

# PROSPECTS OF *MESTIZAJE* AND PLURICULTURAL DEMOCRACY: THE VENEZUELAN CASE OF AN IMAGINED AND A REAL VENEZUELAN SOCIETY

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## Introduction

This essay is a historic-political analysis of *mestizaje* from which a new interpretation is proposed. Such new perspective is aimed at examining the biological and/or cultural mixing among different cultural segments or individuals for “what it is,” rather than to continue viewing it from “what it has become.” From this latter aspect, *mestizaje* is “(...) an elite-generated myth of national identity (...) [that] tends to obscure the conditions of its own creation, to cover its own tracks” (Hale 1996: 2). But once unmasked, it is an ideological instrument of power fabricated by and utilized among the elite for the preservation of its own socio-economic and political interests.

As contrary as it may seem from the above statement, the large and growing body of literature on *mestizaje* has correctly evinced its polysemic and complex character through history and between regions of Latin America and the Caribbean. The dynamic and changing nature of *mestizaje*, for instance, has been revealed in contexts such as: politics of identity formation in a given time and space (Gould, 1996; Hale, 1996b), subaltern identity (Klor de Alva, 1995), historical process (Pérez forthcoming a; Perozo and Pérez ms.; Segato, 1998; Quijano, 2000), and alternative or contested meanings aimed at the official discourse (Briones, 1998; Fuente, 1998; Ramos, 2001; Sheriff, 2000). Yet, all these distinct scholarly findings are to be expected in that these are a warrant product or response to an only available and insoluble equation of *mestizaje* for being made intrinsic and *sui generis*

to most Latin American and Caribbean countries. That is, *mestizaje* became essentialized as solely an "elite-generated myth of national identity," and yet contested even before it became unmasked. But it is precisely this continuous counterhegemonic discourse directed at the official myth where the problem lies. Other more realistic interpretations of *mestizaje* that could perhaps aid towards the restructuring of a better society, cannot surface while this exclusive vision of *mestizaje* continues to be contested by the academia and inclusively by the people affected by it.

The aim of this essay is thus to offer a new vision of *mestizaje* that has been otherwise artfully twisted by the Venezuelan elite<sup>1</sup> in order to express a homogenous *mestizo* culture in Venezuela. In accord to this imposed view, the Venezuelan elite was faced with a considerable number of *mestizo* people in the process of the state and nation building that began in the middle of the 19th century. As a result, the Venezuelan elite had to consider *mestizaje* as an *all-inclusive* process in order to portray a Venezuelan society free of racism. And yet, to delicately envelop it with the ideology of *blanqueamiento* (or whitening) in order to give an image of a society that promised progress, development, and modernization. Such new connotation of *mestizaje* was artfully elaborated as a result of very creative interpretations made by the Venezuelan elite from the ideological currents of Spencerian positivism and Darwinian evolutionism. In this sense, the social base that has supported Venezuela as a nation-state is the **criollo**,<sup>2</sup> and as a concept analogous to that of a "cosmic race" (Vasconcelos, 1948 [1925]), it has been equated with national identity.

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- 1 For the purpose of this essay, the Venezuelan elite corresponds to Venezuela as a nation-state. In the colonial period, for instance, the Venezuelan elite was formed by a powerful group of white Spaniards, who were responsible for the collecting of tributes for the Spanish Crown, and by white criollos (European descendants, born in Venezuela – also refer to note 2). With the initial formation of the republic (1830's), the Venezuelan colonial elite was substituted for a Venezuelan republican elite with the white criollos on top and in the next social stratum, the inclusion of political and military contingents that emerged from the independence feat. This re-composing process was historically maintained throughout the formation of Venezuela as a nation-state and by the effects of a series of events that involved socio-political change, such as the Guerra Federal (or Federal War – 1859), the Revolucion Restauradora (or Restorative Revolution – 1898), and the advent of democracy and of political parties (1945).
  2. The term "criollo" is an ideological construct by the Venezuelan elite to define those individuals or groups that are biologically and culturally mixed. And as such, it conceals the existing cultural diversity, even within the criollo. Originally, criollo corresponded to the descendants of the

In contrast, the interpretation of *mestizaje* from the inside view of subordinate groups is of an *excluding* process as it obviates cultural diversity. That is, the official discourse of *mestizaje*, which became progressively ingrained in the socio-political and economic paradigm generated and fed by the Venezuelan elite, excludes those groups or individuals who do not abide to its incorporated ideology of *blanqueamiento*. Hence, while some of these subordinate groups or individuals either become assimilated into or trickily play within the vertical or hierarchical political paradigm of domination, others definitely reject it as a continuous form of resistance. But what does this adversary response to the dominant paradigm mean? Or to phrase it differently: What have these excluded groups or individuals done to guarantee their own cultural reproduction, representation, and production across time and space? Or what has been the mechanism utilized for cultural resistance and survival among other available strategies?

In order to answer these questions, we begin with the premise that regardless of the skin color,<sup>3</sup> *mestizaje* has been an essential and yet a common biological and/or cultural process of survival for all existing cultures ever since the human species began its diaspora across the planet. Without *mestizaje* there is not survival because cultures are not as once thought isolated islands. But in asymmetrical political contexts through time and space, this *mestizaje* can also take the form of resistance when groups are encountered by or are being subjected to the domination of a common enemy. Here, again, cultures are not, as once thought, ahistorical and passive recipients.

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Spanish colonizers; they were classified within the Venezuelan colonial caste system as white criollos and formed part of the Venezuelan colonial elite through land ownership and the control of produce (e.g., cacao) derived from their land. Within the Venezuelan colonial caste system, there was also a large mass of pardos or mestizos, who were counterpoised with indigenous and black populations in Venezuela. The pardos, however, formed part of the leadership in the War of Independence and in the formation of the republic. The need for their integration and participation in these events by the white criollos (e.g., Simón Bolívar was one of the first to propose such integration) allotted the pardos with the term criollo (refer to note 8), which became thus juxtaposed to the indigenous social caste. Such juxtaposition led, in turn, to the invisibility of the black populations in Venezuela.

3. It is important to state, in biological terms, that the same genes are not necessarily shared or found among the distinct cultural groups that have the same color of skin. Therefore, *mestizaje* can also occur among those distinct cultural groups that have the same skin color.

This kind of *mestizaje* is present, for instance, in the lowland region of Venezuela. As we shall see later in the essay, this *mestizaje* becomes more visible in rural areas inhabited by those cultural segments (e.g., Indigenous Peoples, Afro-Venezuelans, *campesinos* or peasants, and *llaneros* or plainsmen) that have been subordinated, subjugated, or made subaltern by the Venezuelan elite. And its practice is, thus, *sui generis* to the real rather than to the "imagined" (Anderson, 1997 [1983]) Venezuelan society elaborated by the elite.<sup>4</sup> Although culturally different, these groups or individuals share enough similar interests from which to establish non-hierarchically social, political, economic, and religious networks and alliances on behalf of their own cultural reproduction, representation, and production in situations of external threat or in times of need. Yet, these networks and alliances are not fixed; rather, they fluctuate according to each group's needs and interests. But contrary to *mestizaje* as an elite ideology, this is not an imposed process by a particular group onto others with the intention to dominate or to defend and protect its own particular interests. Nor is it used to evaluate or judge the purity or the gamma of skin tones for allowing or preventing upward social mobility of others.

Based on these observations, we have arrived at interpreting *mestizaje* as a symbol *of* and *for* a process of cultural resistance and survival, and we have thus labeled it "*resistant mestizaje*". We have defined it more concretely as: a cultural process of resistance and survival that is based on horizontal political networks and alliances made among subordinated groups in historical contexts of trade, religiosity, bellicosity, and/or real or fictitious kinship relations. At the level of autonomous political decisions, it is these interactions that permit and make viable their cultural reproduction, representation, and production. While the elite ideology is not undermined by its importance of being an imposed view that has been made real, we find it necessary to reveal this other vision of *mestizaje* because it has not yet been addressed, perhaps, for its obvious or too familiar intrinsic quality. Or perhaps, because it has been precisely obscured and down played by this elite ideology that has become so naturalized in our society.

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4. Yet, this *mestizaje* does not exclude the Venezuelan elite. But for being both the creator and practitioner of the official *mestizaje*, the Venezuelan elite often chooses other white groups (e.g., Germans, Italians, and Portuguese) in order to survive and resist as well.

*Resistant mestizaje* has been camouflaged or repressed by an official discourse of *mestizaje* because it goes against the socio-political and economic interests of the Venezuelan elite as well as against the nature of the nation-state that protects that elite. Thus, distortion of its meaning has been made in accord to the ideological currents that were used towards the formation of Venezuela as a nation-state in order to preserve the *status quo*.<sup>5</sup> The elaboration of an allegedly utopian society, however, would be required if *resistant mestizaje* were to function at the national level. Or to be more precise, radical changes in the structural bases of the nation-state would be needed for Venezuelans to build a truly pluricultural and multiethnic democracy that as a political system in that society, it would allow *resistant mestizaje* to function properly without discriminatory barriers.

As a matter of fact, other current scholarly studies have presented prospects for the proper functioning of plural societies – or for the functioning of pluralism within societies (Arvelo-Jiménez, 1996; Bonfil Batalla, 1995; Maybury-Lewis, 1984; Ramos, 2001). Among these prospects, there exists the essence of a true democracy that, while still been sustained by elements of verticality within an alternative political system, would recognize cultural duties, privileges, and rights of all the distinct groups that constitute a society. However, these truly formed pluricultural and multiethnic societies are often referred to as “utopias” for being volatile.<sup>6</sup> Yet, I posit that the functioning of pluralism within these societies can be propitiated if their respective socio-cultural segments seriously acknowledge and positively value their own past or former local models, rather than to anchor on foreign models as it has become customary in many Latin American and Caribbean countries. One particular local model that comes to mind for the case of Venezuela and which will be amply discussed later in this essay, is the System

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5. In the colonial period, there was a caste system of racial categories and boundaries, which also diluted resistant mestizaje.

6. While the necessary mechanisms for the proper functioning of pluralism in some societies (e.g., Venezuelan) are restrained by those in power, in others (e.g., Yugoslavian) the proper integration and functioning of a horizontal system (i.e., supra-ethnic) with some elements of verticality, become problematic or difficult to maintain. But both cases present a similar situation of domination that goes beyond the capitalist/socialist nature of Venezuela and Yugoslavia (or even the Soviet Union), respectively; and it is this domination that generates volatility.

of the Orinoco Regional Interdependence [SORI] pioneered by Nelly Arvelo-Jiménez (1981, 2001; Arvelo-Jiménez and Castillo, 1994; Arvelo-Jiménez, Méndez and Castillo, 1989). But the main point is that these past or former local models definitely enclose significant information that would aid in the (re)construction of better political mechanisms through which ethnic differences and cultural diversity can be resolved.

This essay is thus divided as follows: the first part presents a brief review of *mestizaje* in the Venezuelan scenario, which highlights the creation of an imagined society by the Venezuelan elite and the true consequences of it as depicted in the real Venezuelan society. This section is important not only in that any aspect about Venezuela is very little known abroad, but also because it would provide an adequate historic-political context from which to understand the new interpretation proposed on *mestizaje*. The second part thus offers the new interpretation or prospects of *mestizaje*, and which I leave as a focus of reflection to the readers. Both parts, in a sense, can be visualized as two discourses and two practices of *mestizaje*: One manipulated by the Venezuelan elite and the other by those cultural segments that have been racially and culturally discriminated. The first one promotes domination and the second proposes resistance and survival. The last section entails the concluding remarks, which provides the relevance of our interpretations on *mestizaje* for the current Venezuelan socio-political scenario.

## **The Venezuelan Scenario**

### *The Imagined Venezuelan Society*

As rightly suggested by Benedict Anderson (1997 [1983]: 23), the imagine community is an ideological construction seeking to forge a link between heterogeneity and a homogenous political entity or nation-state, which is inherently limited and sovereign. The Venezuelan society is thus imagined because it brings Venezuelan people together and in communion as members of the nation-state, even when they will never know, meet, or hear of most of their fellow-members (1997 [1983]: 23). And as far as *mestizaje* is concerned, it has been utilized as a symbol *of* and *for* cultural homogeneity and national identity. But do the distinct cultural segments that constitute the Venezuelan

society enjoy equal duties, rights, and privileges? Or why and how was this imagined Venezuelan society ideologically constructed?

By the middle of the 19th century, the Venezuelan people were characterized by the Venezuelan elite as biologically and/or culturally mixed and varied – a mixed of Spanish, Amerindian, and African. This *mestizaje* is the result of historical processes that originated with the conquest and colonization of this region by Iberian colonizers (or the Spaniards); and persisted and continued throughout the formation of Venezuela as a nation-state. In both of these socio-cultural contextualized stages of historical processes, *mestizaje* took on distinct characteristics and meanings in accord to the dominant racial theories of the time. These were: (1) a colonial caste system of racial categories and boundaries, and (2) a homogenous *mestizo* or *criollo* culture and a hidden agenda of *blanqueamiento*.

The latter aspect suggests that *mestizaje* presented a dilemma to Venezuelan intellectuals and elite for its ambiguous character with the prevailing ideological currents of Spencerian positivism and Darwinian evolutionism (Boulton, 1976; Graham, 1990; Skurski, 1994; Wright, 1990). This dilemma centered between the process of constituting a nation-state under a communion of a national identity based on *mestizaje* and of achieving the kind of development, progress, and modernization as those attained by Europeans and subsequently, by North Americans. The latter groups based these advancements on the belief of the superiority and civilized nature of the white race. According to Richard Graham, “Some [Latin American countries] accepted European racist theory without question. Others picked and chose according to what seemed to fit reality as they knew it” (1990: 3). For Venezuela, *mestizaje* became an ideological construct for interpreting and justifying the outcomes of political intercultural relations that occurred since colonialism and that were a product of imposed political systems.<sup>7</sup> As the Venezuela’s emblem of a nation-state and of a national identity, *mestizaje* had to be incorporated and used to the country’s own advantage. It had to

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7. Resistant *mestizaje* became distorted with the penetration of the dominant racial theories, which influenced some countries (e.g., United States) to segregate their nonwhite populations, and others (e.g., Venezuela, Brazil, and Argentina) to whiten their population – although the process of *blanqueamiento* was quicker in Argentina for historical, socio-economic, and political reasons. Although *blanqueamiento* did not involved official segregation, these countries still obviated and denied the cultural diversity of their population.

embrace and represent the Spaniard, Amerindian, and African into one image and yet, to generate a "better" population that would promise progress, development, and modernization. The achievement of the latter goal was to be realized through the mixing of Venezuelans with whiter cultural groups.

Thus, the influence of Venezuelan positivist evolutionism thinkers of the late 19th (e.g., Villavicencio, Rojas, and Marcano) and of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (e.g., Gil Fortoul, Vallenilla Lanz, and Arcaya) on the Venezuelan elite, made the latter reject the notion that *mestizaje* would lead to the weakened of the offspring; a belief that was often preached by North American racist thinkers. Pedro Manuel Arcaya, for instance, explains:

Our new race results to be anthropologically mixed, but psychologically stabled and unified (...). In Latin America, the fusion of all races was the rule (...). Therefore, it is a great error to attach backwardness to Latin America, when it means an enormous progress that can be perceived in the comparison of any of our men of mixed blood with the Indian or African past (...) we belong to a new race: the Venezuelan, which is worthy of being called a historical race (...) manifested through predominant characters of Spanish element and very deep sediments left by the other two elements [Indian and African] (...). (Arcaya, 1983: 194-195).

According to Arcaya, the Venezuelan race had inherited the best human qualities from each racial group. In addition to sustaining *mestizaje* analogously to a cosmic race, the Venezuelan intellectuals utilized it in a symbolic way to differentiate Venezuela from the United States, on the one hand. And on the other hand, used it as a mechanism to deter the filtering of hegemony from the United States into the region as it had already become evident in the Caribbean during the early 20th century. The Venezuelan intellectuals and the elite feared the North Americans' expansionism into Venezuela as this could possibly bring racial attitudes with it, such as racial segregation and violence that the Venezuelans abhorred (Wright, 1990: 73-76).

However contradictory as it may seem, the Venezuelan elite believed that the *pardos*, indigenous peoples, and blacks could not govern themselves. While the indigenous and black peoples were hoped to disappear either through a process of *mestizaje* or by their simple withdrawal onto remote enclaves, the *pardos*<sup>8</sup> were to be integrated with the white criollos in order

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8. The *pardos* passed on to be criollos or mestizos in the 19th century (refer to notes 1 and 2).



to form a wider social base from which to build a homogenous *mestizo* culture. Many Venezuelan scholars, for instance, affirm that racial differences were absorbed in the process of the nation's formation (Liscano, 1950; Morón, 1971; Pollak-Eltz, 1979, 1988, and 1993; Uslar Pietri, 1948). An opinion shared among them is that *mestizaje* is an all-inclusive selection, which brings about homogeneity and harmony that best describes the Venezuelan people. Therefore, these scholars maintain that differences in the color of the skin neither propitiated racism in Venezuela, nor were the cause of the socio-economic marginality lived by indigenous peoples and blacks. Yet, Faye Harrison states that:

(...) a multiplicity of graded socioracial categories does not necessarily signify an absence of racism (...) the color continuum...has represented a measure of "improvement" (through admixture and/or the lightening of class mobility) for people whose African [and indigenous] origins were historically defined in terms of cultural deficiency and racial inferiority (1995: 55).

In essence, *mestizaje* for the Venezuelan intellectuals and elite meant: (1) the blending of human races that solved potential racial tensions and conflicts; (2) the assimilation and acculturation of indigenous and black peoples who desired to become part of the mainstream Venezuelan society; and (3) the strengthening of the Venezuelan *mestizo* population on behalf of the betterment of its socio-political and economic conditions.<sup>9</sup>

Although the Venezuelan intellectuals and elite perceived *mestizaje* as the uniting national thread, they were still concerned about the further progress, development, and modernization of their country. In this context, "notions of *mestizaje* were (...) permeated with a 'whitening superiority'" (Pérez Sarcluy and Stubbs, 1995: 4). As a result, the Venezuelan dominant culture, thus, supported the immigration of white Europeans in order to whiten, even more so biologically and/or culturally, its already existing *mestizo* population. Winthrop Wright, for instance, correctly states:

(...) Venezuelan elite often saw the actual state of racial mixing as a manifestation of retrogression and a cause of national stagnation and disorder that could be cured only

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9. In reality, the Venezuelan elite needed to safeguard its socio-economic and political interests through the development of economic models that were in harmony with capitalist accumulation and with the subordination and marginality of the masses.

## PROSPECTS OF *MESTIZAJE* AND PLURICULTURAL DEMOCRACY

by the infusion of more white blood. For them whitening the population offered the only sensible solution, both to the nation's long-standing labor and economic problems and to its political stability (1990: 96).

Thus, the need to bring in white Europeans for the infusion of more white blood into the Venezuelan population was proclaimed by the Venezuelan elite ever since 1823 (Izard, 1976: 18). In agreement with Wright, "Venezuelans wanted to dilute the *café* (or coffee) as much as possible with *leche* (or milk)" (1990: 2). This preference of more milk in the Venezuelan's coffee was seen in the attitudes of the elite as it ostensibly fomented, since 1891, the entry of white Europeans, while prohibiting it to nonwhite immigrants. But the poor economic and political conditions were a factor for the failure of many of the national programs developed for bringing in white Europeans into the country. It was not until 1914 and much more after the Second World War that Venezuela began to receive white European immigrants.

Although the Venezuelan current of positivist evolutionism declined by 1935, its influence continued to prevail in the mind of Venezuelan elite; that is, it still advocated the whitening of the Venezuelan population. Yet, the Venezuelan society did not remain the same. Both national and international affairs heightened the sensitivity of many Venezuelans toward democracy as a healthy political regime as well as toward the appreciation of cultural diversity. Venezuela experienced, between 1936 and 1958, many political and economic changes. While the year of 1936 marked for Venezuelans the birth and growth of democracy, and thus the spin off of political parties, the year of 1958 (to the present) meant the consolidation of that democracy as a political system and of its respective theoretic-political bases. Among the competing political parties, *Acción Democrática* – AD (or Democratic Action) became, perhaps, the most successful for the social, political, economic, and ideological platform it offered. In fact, AD opened its membership doors to individuals of all colors and social classes in order for them to become advocates of its party platform. Thus, it did not only encompass a multi-racial and multi-class political movement, but also challenged whitening social policies. Rómulo Betancourt, a founding father of the AD party, for instance, expresses:

Our immigration policy followed a definite sociological concept. We wanted the immigrant to increase our production and to fill the country. We did not consider the

white man as such or the European as superior to the Venezuelan mixed blood. We were not interested in a transfer of civilization as one might bring some Swiss pine saplings to give style to a tropical garden, filled with our mango and tamarind trees. We were worried, on the contrary, in “*acriollar*” the immigrant by incorporating him in our national soil and in our world still in formation. The natural way to reach this objective was to put the immigrant to live in mixed communities in order to mix his blood with that of the native people (...). (1969: 527).

But whether the aim was to “*acriollar*” or to “*blanquear*,” the end result was the same. That is, AD made a little twist to the political discourse of *mestizaje* and *blanqueamiento* as a way to include and advocate the myth of racial democracy as part of its party rhetoric. But if the original intention of AD were to progressively implement a true racial democracy in Venezuela, it unfortunately failed for not been able or not been allowed to materialize it. Although this political party continues at the forefront in the institutionalization of democracy in Venezuela, AD has abided to the elite ideology of *mestizaje* that its political counterparts have always supported and shared, and that has served to set the bases for the creation of an imagined Venezuelan society.

Hugo Rafael Chávez Frías, President of the *República Bolivariana de Venezuela* (or the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela) since 1999, received and continues to operate under this imagined Venezuelan society. He assumes, however, the 1945 political banner of the AD party that was anchored on an old fashioned Marxist thought, but radicalizes this discourse by adding to it echoes of Fascism, populism, and Cuban revolutionary mechanisms (e.g., *Círculos Bolivarianos* or Bolivarian Circles). As a result, Chávez has divided the Venezuelan society between those groups that have been subordinated, subjugated, or made subaltern (e.g., Indigenous Peoples, Afro-Venezuelans, *campesinos*, and *llaneros*) by the Venezuelan elite and the Venezuelan elite that he defines as oligarchs, while leaving out and ignoring the middle class.<sup>10</sup> Through his strong and fervent support on those groups that are both socio-economically most needed and placed on the periphery, Chavez has juxtaposed, intentionally or not, the Venezuelan elite to these groups. This new positioning of actors has opened the Pandora box of delicate

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10. The Venezuelan middle-class progressively emerged in the 1960's. It grew and became strongly consolidated as a result of the oil boom generated by the Gulf War.

issues (e.g., racism and class antagonism) that have been dormant until now. Yet, it is too early to say what would the transformations be in the imagined Venezuelan society and how these would affect the real Venezuelan society under Chavez' administration. For now, the vision and practice of political democracy still remains within a vertical and exclusive paradigm.

## *The Real Venezuelan Society*

Although Venezuelans are characterized as *mestizos* by the elite, nuclei of indigenous peoples and blacks are still prevalent in the country today.<sup>11</sup> These groups, however, have been left in a disadvantageous position as a result of the political relations and conditions between them and the nation-state. That is, their socio-economic marginality and exclusion from society have been sustained by the nation-state's disregard of their socio-cultural profile and histories – or more strongly stated, of their cultural or ethnic ancestry, identity, and native rights (or *derechos originarios*). This disregard is further supported by an official history that minimizes ethnic differences and cultural diversity in order to reinforce, ideologically, the presence of a powerful elite, the protection of that elite's socio-economic and political interests, and the prevalence of a belief in a nation-state as culturally homogenous.

But while most Venezuelan scholars (Bermúdez and Suárez, 1995; Pollak-Eltz, 1979, 1988, 1993) deny the existence of racism, they admit the presence, however, of class consciousness in their society. In other words, differences in perception and treatment of people across the socio-economic strata are a reality. Hence, they claim that the well-being and socio-economic success (or upward social mobility) of a person is not attributed to the color of the skin or ethnic origin, but to other variables, such as the degree of education (that is, the “knowing how to act”), status,

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11. There are other socio-cultural segments that, even though do not necessarily express a specific cultural or ethnic consciousness, represent differentiated cultural aggregates that in some cases allude to historical and cultural roots – or what has been classified and known today as *indio genérico* or generic indian (Pérez 2000a). Some examples are the Eastern Venezuela fishing communities and the Venezuelan Andean agricultural communities.

wealth, occupation, and influence among other aspects. Angelina Pollak-Eltz, for example, states that "the majority of Afrovenezuelans belong to the lower strata of society. This is due to class differences, lack of educational opportunities for the rural sector, and little spatial mobility until recently" (1979: 31). And in his study of racism in Venezuela, Wright additionally highlights that many Venezuelans said that, "they disliked blacks only because they were poor" (1990: 5). But what opportunities can Indigenous Peoples, Afro-Venezuelans, and other cultural segments have when their socio-economic experience is characterized by the lack of or poor conditions in housing, education, employment, medical services, as well as communication and road systems among others? Nevertheless, Pollak-Eltz admits in another article that the problems of socio-economic marginality have not been analyzed in racial terms (1993: 4). But studies conducted in Colombia, Ecuador, and Venezuela (Streicker, 1995; Stutzman, 1981; Wright, 1990, respectively), have shown what otherwise is not openly and loudly proclaimed: that class discourse encodes racism.

It is thus important to ask: Should studies on socio-economic marginality be analyzed in racial terms or vice-versa? Can one of these two factors not influence or affect the other? Can one obscure or mask the other? As Alfredo Toro Hardy points out, the answer is that "both factors [social and racial] are so intertwined that it is difficult to separate them (...) poverty and skin color tend to integrate themselves into one and indissoluble equation" (1993: 18). In this sense, we argue that the colonial thread of racial prejudice and discrimination has been maintained, more or less, among the Venezuelan elite for it continues to hinder on the socio-economic and political prosperity of the distinct cultural segments that make-up the lower economic strata of the Venezuelan society. And in turn, it is also to the interest of the Venezuelan elite not to invest in areas, such as education, in order to keep and maintain the subordinate groups in the condition of powerless.

While *mestizaje*, however, has served as a mechanism to portray a Venezuelan society free of racial conflicts and tensions, the interpretation of lack of racism and the existence of class difference have only constituted a justification of the status quo. This is to say that the Venezuelan society may appear to reflect racial democracy, especially in cases where there have been socio-political and economic rise and mobility by a few subordinate groups or individuals. But in retrospect, their inclusion to society, on the one hand, condemns their own cultural or ethnic identity to neglect. That is, those who

## PROSPECTS OF *MESTIZAJE* AND PLURICULTURAL DEMOCRACY

become successful based on their artistic or athletic talents, or who reach respected socio-political or economic ranking positions, have had to undergo through a process of *mestizaje* that exclusively leans on the ideology of *blanqueamiento* and at the expense of ethnic difference and cultural diversity. On the other hand, those who have not abided to *blanqueamiento* are excluded from society and sentenced to a state of socio-economic stagnation where the flow of benefits and services, as well as cultural or ethnic recognition are reduced to a minimum.

*Blanqueamiento* is a racist mechanism; one of the goals is to purify the race, genetically and culturally, as a result of *mestizaje*. Ronald Stutzman expresses it well both in the title of his essay, *El Mestizaje: an all-inclusive ideology of exclusion* and in the following statement that he makes in reference to his work in Ecuador:

(...) this "selective process" is referred to as *blanqueamiento* – a putative lightening or "whitening" of the population in both the biogenetic and cultural-behavioral senses of the term *blanco*. The cultural goals, the society, and even the physical characteristics of the dominant class are taken by members of that class to be the objective of all cultural, social, and biological movement and change (1981: 49).

The praxis of *blanqueamiento* became more evident in Venezuela, as already stated earlier in this essay, in 1891 when the dominant population lawfully prohibited the entry of black immigrants and sought, instead, the immigration of white Europeans for the purpose of increasing the whitening of the national *mestizo* population. But even in 1795, a colonial decree granted nonwhites the right to purchase certificates called *gracias al sacar* (or literally, thanks for the exclusion – or dispensations from color). Although this decree was counteracted by many members of the colonial Venezuelan elite, it allowed both blacks and *pardos* to participate and thus, to be included in the Venezuelan colonial society for a price. Yet, Nina S. de Friedemann, for instance, explains:

(...) the ideology of genetic and cultural *blanqueamiento* implicitly brings within it the process of *mestizaje*. The latter, as a goal of sociopolitical action, is discriminatory in the light of the existing diversity of socio-racial groups that demand their rights for identity. Indians and blacks who are absorbed in a mixed blood population whose goals are to whiten, will disappear from specific scenarios of identity as well as from the scenarios of national identity (1992: 28).

The two Venezuelan cases stated above represent the implementation and praxis of *blanqueamiento* through the *mestizaje* of the Venezuelan population. As such, both situations evince a concerted effort of a (colonial or republican) Venezuelan elite to make invisible and thus ignore the present, the history, and the rights of groups and individuals.

On two occasions, for example, we witnessed an Afro-Venezuelan declare that to defy this invisibility of ethnic difference and cultural diversity, they must demand, at the very least, the recognition of their participation within the national cultural matrix.<sup>12</sup> Yrene Ugueto, in a similar vein, expresses:

The Venezuelan society is characterized for being biologically *mestizo* and multicultural (...) thus constituting a trap to hide social and racial discrimination against the indigenous and Afro-Venezuelan person (...). Venezuelan people have internalized throughout the colonial and post-colonial processes, feelings of unworthiness toward their origin as well as distrust of their potentialities and future possibilities at the individual and collective arena; it is for this reason that the indigenous or black person is frequently minimized in the face of assumed excellency of the Anglo-Saxon world (1993: 25).

The same issue raised by Ugueto, was discussed in a Venezuelan television talk show, in which a group of black women were interviewed. Their conclusion was similar to that of Ugueto as well as that of Ligia Montañes (1993). That is, *mestizaje* is an all-inclusive selection and blending, but which through its ideology of *blanqueamiento* comes to *exclude* and socio-economically *marginalize* the existing cultural diversity and ethnic difference from the mainstream society. Or as Norman Whitten Jr. and Arlene Torres suggest, "*Mestizaje* is a powerful force of exclusion of both black and indigenous communities" (1992: 21). Yet, this reality has not minimized or annulled the continuous resistance of subordinate groups against the different forms of domination on behalf of their cultural autonomy and survival. Otherwise, how do we explain their presence and prevalence in this society today? (Refer to the special issue on Venezuela in *Ethnohistory*, 47 [3-4]).

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12. These two occasions were: the First National Festival of Popular Culture (or Primer Festival Nacional de la Cultura Popular) in Paparo, Miranda State (June 5th-12th, 1993) and the First Congress of Afro-Venezuelan Communities (or Primer Congreso de Pueblos Afro-Venezolanos) in Choroní, Aragua State (June 9th-12th, 1994).

What remains clear is that this is the real Venezuelan society: culturally heterogeneous and enclosed in an imagined community. But it is also evident that this society is the effect of an imagined Venezuelan society that excludes and makes marginal those groups and individuals that do not abide to the ideology of *blanqueamiento* through *mestizaje*. Although the AD party tried, with or without truthful intentions, to incorporate them into the mainstream culture through the implementation of distinct projects and programs, it failed in providing to most of them a breakaway from their socio-economic stagnation. And now, it remains to be seen what Chávez has planned for them.

### **Prospects of *Mestizaje***

Despite of the socio-economic and political injustices provoked by the imagined Venezuelan society, the prevalence of subordinate groups in the Venezuelan real society can partly be explained by their engagement and participation in the process of *resistant mestizaje*. To understand *resistant mestizaje*, there is a need to take on a larger spectrum and reflect upon the contributions made by scholars in their theorizing of cultural diversity and power. Our specific theoretical premise to interpret *resistant mestizaje* is that the indigenous cultures have not been isolated islands as once thought; nor are these ahistorical entities, or passive recipients. These distinct Peoples have had an active participation in the making of their own history, and in forming and constituting their own social reality. Studies especially focused on the lowlands of South America and in particularly on the Carib indigenous groups (Arvelo-Jiménez, 1981, 2001; Arvelo-Jiménez and Castillo, 1994; Arvelo-Jiménez, Méndez and Castillo, 1989; Biord, 1985; González, 1986; Morales Méndez, 1979; Morales Méndez and Arvelo-Jiménez, 1981; and Whitehead, 1992, 1994a, 1994b), have demonstrated the importance of inter-cultural relations in the management of cultural resistance and survival in periods of conflict or harmony, or in terms of fission or fusion.

Among these studies, there is the home-ridden example known as the System of Orinoco Regional Interdependence (or SORI), pioneered by



Arvelo-Jiménez.<sup>13</sup> Her scholarly works reveal the presence of a macro-political system in the Orinoco Basin during colonial time.<sup>14</sup> This system transcended the purely ethnic level of socio-cultural integration through the creation of a complex web of inter-ethnic relations. These inter-ethnic relations were ample and non-hierarchical that permitted, in turn, the permanency of political-economic autonomy and “culture proper”<sup>15</sup> (or *cultura propia* – Bonfil Batalla, 1997) of each of the distinct ethnic groups involved (e.g., Kari’ña, Ye’kuana, and the later incorporation of black maroons and their descendants, the Aripaëño).

But as the encroachment of external cultural forces became a reality, first by the Spaniards in their conquest and colonization and subsequently, by the Venezuelan elite in their formation of a nation-state, the SORI, for example, did not disappeared. On the contrary, it continued to persevere, even though retrieved in the periphery and much more reduced or modified. And it has been through our field research among the Aripaëño, for example, that we have been able to observe the functioning of the SORI.<sup>16</sup>

The Aripaëño, who currently live in the community of Aripao located on the east bank of the Caura River, Bolívar State, are descendants of runaway black slaves, or maroons. Their ancestors, however, carried out in the middle of the 18th century a *grand marronnage* (or their permanent flight from their Dutch oppressors) from the colonial plantations of the Dutch Guiana to the Upper Caura River. we have argued (Pérez, 2000a, 2000b) that during this journey, the Aripaëño forebears likely took advantage of the SORI for it offered an advantageous scenario in which to seek refuge and simultaneously, in which to form socio-political, economic, and/or religious networks and alliances as mechanisms for survival and resistance. And just like in the

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13. Arvelo-Jiménez has written several articles on SORI as an only author (1981, 2001), a first author (1989, 1994), and a co-author (Morales Méndez and Arvelo-Jiménez, 1981).

14. Arvelo-Jiménez hypothesizes that the SORI became, perhaps, in use in pre-colonial times. But more research is needed either to verify or to refute it.

15. *Cultura propia* is the ambit of initiative, of creativity in all the aspects of a culture. The capacity of an autonomous response (against aggression, domination and inclusively of hope) resides on the presence of a culture proper (Bonfil Batalla, 1991: 54).

16. The election conducted by the indigenous ethnic groups for the selection of three of their members to participate and represent them in the Venezuelan National Constituent Assembly is an example of inter-ethnic relations in the political praxis.

past, the Aripaeño continue, today, to insert themselves and participate in this reduced or modified horizontal political system of regional interdependence. Such system has allowed them to develop and maintain social, political, economic, and religious networks and alliances with other groups in the surrounding periphery without jeopardizing both their own cultural autonomy and their control over natural and cultural resources (for more details, refer to Pérez, ms. a, ms. b). Some examples are: (1) the inter-cultural marriages that have occurred between the Aripaeño and the Kari'ña, Ye'kuana, or *llaneros*, which do not only expand the horizons of affinal and consanguineous relationships beyond locality, but also can induce other kinds of existing social relationships, such as *compadrazgo* (or god-parenthood relationship); (2) the practice of a system of restricted exchange and reinforced with a deferred exchange that take place among the Aripaeño and between the Aripaeño and other cultural groups; and (3) the religious prestations and counterprestations between the Aripaeño and other groups of adjacent areas. These inter-ethnic relationships have, in turn, served them to bring about regional solidarity. This is especially important in times of socio-political, economic, or religious strains and needs caused by ecological disasters, cultural circumstances, or the penetration and influence of actors from the metropolis (for more details, refer to Pérez, forthcoming b, ms. b).

Based on these findings – in combination with a careful bibliographic analysis of the lowland region of South America and established interviews with expert ethnologists of the Orinoco – we were able to discern a different interpretation of what *mestizaje* signifies to the groups that have been subordinated, subjugated, or made subaltern by the Venezuelan elite (for more details, refer to Pérez and Perozo, ms.). And also that the SORI provides a proper scenario for this *resistant mestizaje* to occur. The emphasis of the SORI on its ample and horizontal interactions allows the process of *resistant mestizaje*: (1) to transcend the colonial, post-, and neocolonial contexts, and (2) to evince the autonomy in decision-making of the distinct groups that form part of a pluricultural and multiethnic setting. Seen in this manner, *resistant mestizaje* permits the interpretation of the socio-cultural reality as much as the actual condition of any community through an examination of its mythic history and its socio-cultural profile. The latter is based on the capacity of its people in deciding what to integrate, eliminate, transform, and/or sublimate among their own and others' cultural elements. In essence,

*resistant mestizaje* is utilized: (1) as a strategic articulation with other groups on behalf of each group's own cultural survival, and (2) as a mechanism of cultural resistance before any foreign or alien cultural force that would threaten a group's survival, autonomy, and/or cultural ethos. It is within this context that we have thus defined *resistant mestizaje* as a cultural process of resistance and survival, which is based on horizontal political negotiations and alliances made among the subordinated groups in historical contexts of trade, religiosity, bellicosity, and/or real or fictitious kinship relations.<sup>17</sup> At the level of autonomous political decisions, it is these interactions that permit and make viable their own cultural reproduction, representation, and production.

Hence, *resistant mestizaje* is at work, albeit in micro-scales and underlying the dominant imagined Venezuelan society. But as long as this imagined society continues to exist and function within a vertical built political system copied from foreign models, many subordinate groups will continue to be excluded from the Venezuelan socio-political and economic system. In order to assure their full representation and participation, the Venezuelan leaders must radically reorganize the nation-state. Guillermo Bonfil Batalla (1995: 13-15), for instance, posits that the reorganization of a nation-state must begin with the real political units, which are its culturally diverse groups. He continues to specify that the fundamental requirements for this reorganization would be: (1) to guarantee their territoriality or their rights to communal land, (2) to respect their political autonomy, (3) to embrace reciprocal and symmetrical inter-cultural relations, and (4) to sustain equal access to resources. A fifth (or more) could be added: to provide access in the expression of their symbolic universe that defines their cultural ethos or spirit. The difficulty in meeting these requirements is, perhaps, the reason for referring as utopia the proper functioning of pluralism in any society. According to Arvelo-Jiménez:

A plural society is revealed to us as another theoretical and imagined creation as it does not inherently contain real mechanisms of joint partnership, of joint efforts or management, and of equitable relations among ethnocultural or sociocultural segments of the modern state. The confrontation between theory and praxis makes me perceive

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17. Thanks to Nelly Arvelo-Jiménez and Abel Perozo for offering suggestions that turned out to be fruitful in the elaboration of this new interpretation of mestizaje.

## PROSPECTS OF *MESTIZAJE* AND PLURICULTURAL DEMOCRACY

plural society as an *utopia*; nevertheless, this utopia still fulfills the powerful function of inciting reflection and research towards the creation of new political forms that would inherently involve the unity of ethnic differences and cultural *diversity* (1996: 21).

The cultural reality of distinct ethno-cultural or socio-cultural segments within the same society must be evinced and incorporated into the new political forms, while *resistant mestizaje*, analyzed and practiced outside the ideological context of colonialism as well as post- and neocolonialism, moves these different socio-cultural segments closer to that Utopia. In the reinterpretation of the all-inclusive context inherent in the SORI, actors have strategic potentials to design socio-political systems with substantive elements of: (1) autonomy, (2) decentralization, and (3) pluriculturalism.

Unfortunately, the Venezuelan elite has managed to suppress and obscure with distortions *resistant mestizaje* in their continuous elaboration of an imagined Venezuelan society. This is confirmed by what some scholars (Apffel-Marglin, 1996; Coronil, 1996; Fanon, 1970 [1952] and 1982 [1961]) have stated about the formerly colonized nation-states and their peoples. Frédérique Apffel-Marglin, for instance, claims that "Political decolonization has not meant the decolonization of minds" (1996: 12). That is, the dialectics between those who are in power and those who are oppressed in the Venezuelan society has not ended. The Venezuelan elite continues to impose foreign models onto indigenous and other subordinate social segments, through which they hope to illegitimate traditional knowledge. In a similar vein and in agreement with Fernando Coronil, "the 'post' of postcolonialism is not a sign of the overcoming but the reproduction of colonialism" (1996: 68). This is to say that the knowledge system of hegemony imported by the first colonizers continues to be alive, filtered, and reproduced by the Venezuelan elite in its asymmetrical relationships with the distinct cultural segments (or its subordinate groups). Or by the same token, this relationship between dominion and resistance also continues to operate between First and Third World countries.

## Concluding Remarks

The dynamic interplay between the official and the counterhegemonic discourse continues to be a reality in Venezuela. The social dilemma arises from a Venezuelan elite that pretends to agglomerate the Venezuelan people as citizens in a homogenous *mestizo* culture for reasons of social control, or arises from those distinct cultural segments that for obvious reasons of exclusion question the legitimacy of those in power and refute the racial and ethnic categories imposed on them precisely by those in power. It is important to mention that these two discourses are not being analytically dichotomized in that, in practice, elements of both can coexist accordingly to specific historical contexts in which an individual or a collective assumes a particular identity (Mallon, 1996). But in despite of this dialectical interplay between the two discourses in which neither one outwits the other, I argue that a homogenous *mestizo* culture continues to prevail in Venezuela for being made so intrinsic and *sui generis* by the elite during the formation of the nation-state.

However, Hugo Chávez may be slowly erasing the essentialized nature of *mestizaje* characterized as an elite-generated myth of national identity. When he speaks about the Venezuelan people, Chávez refers to them as “*el soberano*” (or the sovereign). And by *el soberano*, he explicitly or implicitly includes and connotes precisely that block of the Venezuelan population that has been subordinated, subjugated, or made subalterns, while *excluding* that sector of the population which he defines as *oligarcas* (or oligarchs). Yet, Chávez is also making the Venezuelan people homogenous through his usage of *el soberano*. That is, he does not clearly acknowledge and carefully distinguish the cultural and ethnic diversity found precisely among those groups or individuals that have not been incorporated accordingly to the mandates of the Venezuelan elite ideology. In this sense, both revolutionary processes of the 20th century, AD and Chávez, have not properly understood, handled, and given a solution to the ethno-cultural discrimination. Instead, they have wanted to foment, each according to their respective discourse, socio-political equality by focusing on the superficial and tangible aspects rather than on the deeper roots of the Venezuelan society. But until Chávez’ personalized discourse becomes solidified and depending on how it would be implemented in the Venezuelan society, the creed of racial democracy would continue to be a myth. This myth is anchored on a social system in

which the central principles are geared towards individual rights at the exclusion of those collective rights of the Indigenous Peoples, Afro-Venezuelans, and other socio-cultural segments. And this exclusion is often based on the premises copied from outside models that favor a vertical socio-political and economic system, which culturally harms the subordinate groups that have been horizontally interacting at the inter-ethnic level while respecting their own political autonomy and *cultura propia* (or culture proper).

But while there is an imagined Venezuelan society at work under an imposed ideology of *blanqueamiento* through *mestizaje*, the real Venezuelan society expresses itself through *resistant mestizaje*, which cuts across any cultural, ethnic, racial, and social class barriers. *Resistant mestizaje* is based on shared common interests from which the distinct cultural segments establish horizontal social, political, economic and/or religious networks and alliances in order to secure their own cultural production, representation, and reproduction in situations of external threat or in times of need. This *mestizaje*, however, is not a counterhegemonic discourse directly aimed to offset the elite ideology. On the contrary, it naturally emerges from the interactions that occur among the distinct cultural segments that happened to share an area or a region. And yet, the outcomes of these interactions, such as the networks and alliances made among them, are not fixed; rather, they fluctuate according to each group's needs and interests. These groups, however, are not isolated islands because they are not immune to the external forces of a vertical or hierarchical political paradigm of domination belonging to either the Venezuelan nation-state or the globalized world; and for not being such, these groups are neither ahistorical, nor passive recipients. It is in this context where *resistant mestizaje* can be seen as counterhegemonic at large in that these subordinate groups can and do come together as blocks to defy any policies or development projects and programs that they consider detrimental to their well-being (Pérez 2000a, forthcoming b, ms. a, ms. b).

The Venezuelan political system has been a product of historical processes which have entailed an interplay between domination and resistance; such tension envelops an interlocking flow of power relations that are dynamically intertwined and historically contextualized through time and space (Hill, 1998; Whitehead, 1992). An understanding of this dialectic interplay will allow the analysis not only of socio-cultural change, but also of cultural continuity that can still be perceived today among contemporary Indigenous and Afro-Venezuelan populations. While the phenomenon of

socio-cultural change involves processes of ethnogenesis, the continuity of socio-cultural elements encompasses issues of territoriality, identity, and ethos. Moreover, the understanding of *resistant mestizaje* can bring about radical changes within the structural bases of the dominant society; changes that would induce a pluricultural and multi-ethnic political system or democracy in the Venezuelan society.

But as I mentioned earlier in this essay and which I now turn it in the form of questions: How can *resistant mestizaje* properly function in the Venezuelan nation-state? Would its proper functioning eliminate the imagined Venezuelan society? Can there be a true democracy that, while still been sustained by elements of verticality within an alternative political system, would recognize cultural duties, privileges, and rights of all the Venezuelans who constitute the imaginary community? I do not pretend to have the answers to these questions, and much less to develop an alternative political system at large. Yet, I do argue that local models, such as the System of the Orinoco Regional Interdependence (SORI), can serve as tools of inspiration toward the (re)construction of better political mechanisms through which ethnic differences and cultural diversity can be resolved. In this sense, Venezuela needs to make radical changes in the structural bases in order to build a truly pluricultural and multiethnic democracy that as a political system in that society, it would allow *resistant mestizaje* to function properly without discriminatory barriers. And in agreement with Bonfil Batalla (1995), the reorganization of a nation-state must begin with the real political units, which are the culturally diverse groups.

So, what has the Chávez' government done differently in the last three years (1999 to the present) while in Office in regards to the issues raised in this essay? First, there is a new Constitution (1999) that has characterized, without precedent, the Venezuelan society as pluricultural and multiethnic. Although the Indigenous Peoples are for the first time acknowledged and incorporated in this Constitution, there are other cultural segments, such as the Afro-Venezuelans, that continue to be ignored or invisible by society at writ. Yet, it remains to be seen how the proper functioning of pluralism would be implemented in the Venezuelan society. Second, the real Venezuelan society, which is mainly constituted by *el soberano*, has become the fundamental priority of the government, even though the fate of this sector remains to be seen. However, this focus has produced a divided society. That is, the Venezuelan elite has been placed in juxtaposition to *el soberano* as the latter

is apparently obtaining and gaining socio-political power through the *Círculos Bolivarianos* (or the Bolivarian Circles) which are an example of the participative democracy that defines the new Constitution. And the destiny of the middle-class is still unknown. Is the middle-class strata ignored by the government with the intention to lower its socio-economic status in order to be later incorporated within the real Venezuelan society? Or is it being ignored in order for the middle-class to retrieve itself with the Venezuelan elite into a state of exclusion or possible exile? Third, there is the *Asamblea Nacional Constituyente* or the National Constituent Assembly, which has for the first time, democratically elected members who represent the real Venezuelan society. One example is the participation of Indigenous Peoples as deputy members of the Assembly (refer to footnote 16). The Afro-Venezuelans, however, continue to be invisible. Yet, it remains to be seen how the needs and interests of the culturally diverse groups would be addressed and delivered by the members who represent them. And fourth, there have been social and economic projects and programs at the national and international level, (e.g., the *Plan Bolívar 2000* and the insertion of Cuban medical doctors in the Venezuelan health system) to attend the real Venezuelan society, which has been the most needed or excluded. Yet, the fruits of these projects and programs remain to be palpable.

Would Chávez government be the one to answer the questions and/or provide the solutions to the problems that we have raised in this essay? We cannot yet judge a political project that has only been in gear for three years and especially more so when the former political establishment with all its transformations and modifications, has long-lived two hundred years, more or less. Nevertheless, if Chávez were to be conscious of the deeper meanings contained in a pluricultural and multiethnic society, his government agenda would have put forward programs for those who have always been included and for those who have always been excluded and made invisible.



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## PROSPECTS OF MESTIZAJE AND PLURICULTURAL DEMOCRACY

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